

'One day you'll realise you're not broken, just different'

After spending most of her life feeling isolated and faulty – and on the receiving end of treatments for various mental illnesses – in 2020, 39-year-old writer Kat Brown discovered that she had the neurodevelopmental condition ADHD.

Here she pens a letter to her 20-year-old self, with lessons for us all

Dear Kat,

I've started this letter many times, only to run away from it. I feel so guilty when I think of the years you've spent, and will spend, believing you're broken. Despite showing all the markers of 'success' from the outside – a 2:1 from a good university, jobs at high-profile places, a long-standing, loving relationship – inside it all feels too *much*, and your twenties and thirties will be focused on trying to fix yourself with therapy, antidepressants, SAD lamps, food and alcohol. If only I could intervene and tell you that you don't need fixing, because there's nothing wrong with you; you have combined ADHD.

It's also known as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which isn't an illness or a defect, but simply how your brain is made; a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by three core behaviours – hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattention.

It's an injustice that when you were at school in the 1990s, mental health was barely given a second thought –

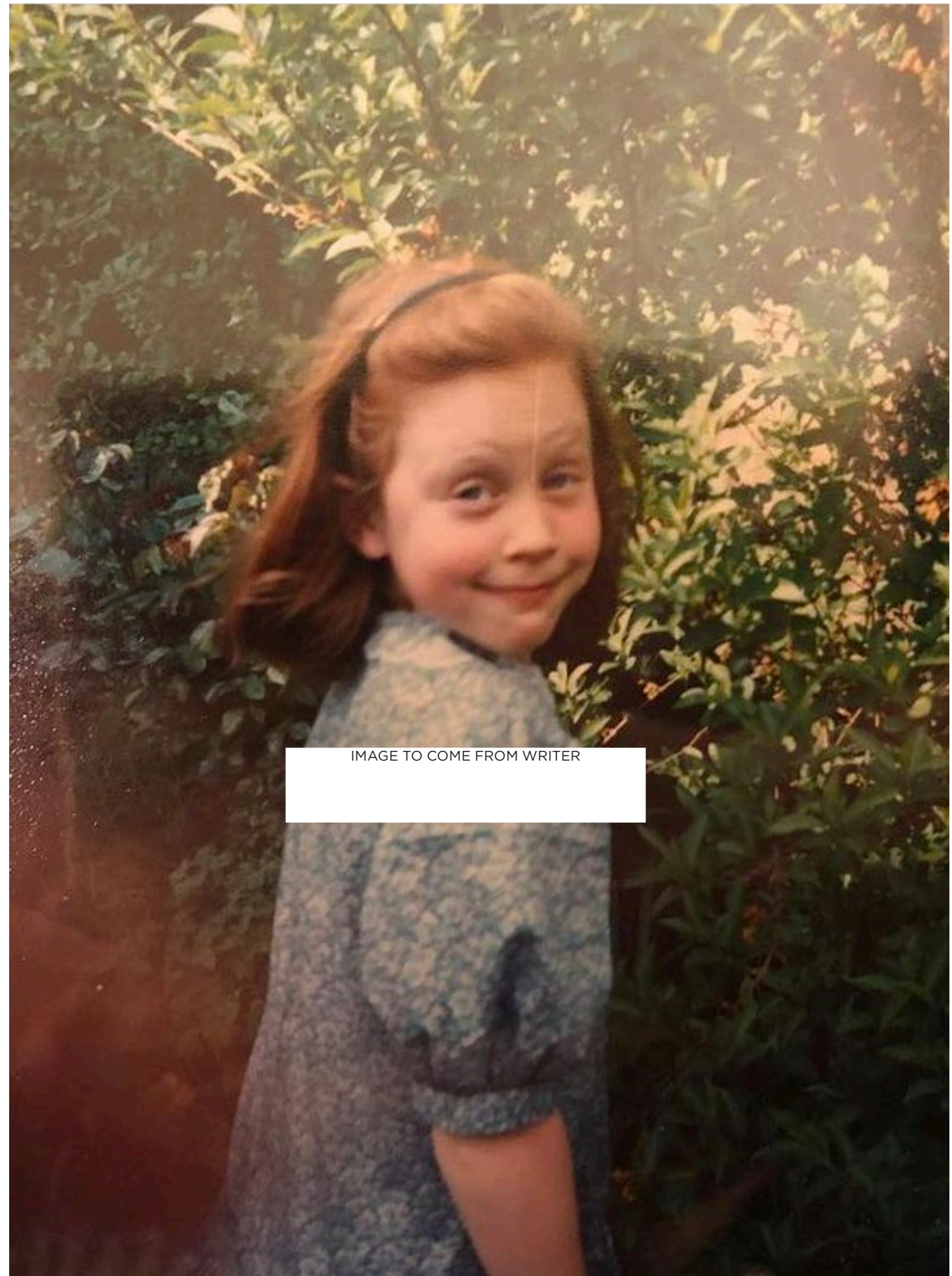
and ADHD was terminology only thrown around to describe boys with a tendency to be boisterous. It didn't help that, because of your height, you were moved up a year, as it meant all the problems associated with ADHD – struggling with executive functions such as self-control, memory and organisation – were explained away by teachers as immaturity. I'm sorry there wasn't more support – not like children have access to today – though we've still got a long way to go until ADHD is widely recognised and properly diagnosed, especially in adults. I know now that this lack of support, and the subsequent loneliness and shame, were why you began using food to push down those feelings when you were 10, and why you later started shoplifting. You'll keep shoplifting until you're

22, when a security guard catches you nicking a Crunchie from WHSmith and you're so ashamed you never steal again. It would be funny if it wasn't so pathetic, but please don't feel alone; people with undiagnosed ADHD are nine times more likely to end up in prison, and more likely to get into accidents, be fired, divorce their partners and struggle with addiction. It's why getting the right diagnosis is so important.

I know university is proving tough. You've signed up for so many activities, not just because you enjoy them but because your brain gets too loud and shouty when you're alone. And writing essays at 3am, because you've left them to the last minute, is the norm, easily laughed off by nodding to student stereotypes. By the time you graduate, you'll have lost seven sets of keys to your student house. Unfortunately,



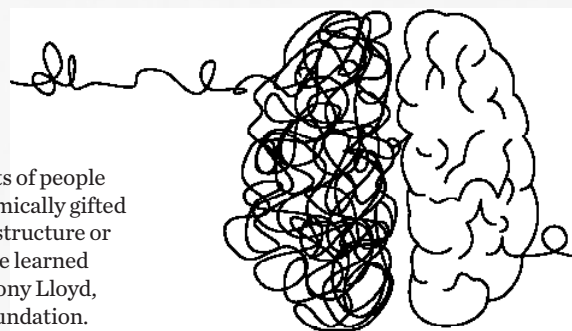
IMAGE TO COME FROM WRITER



this is your normal; lots of people with ADHD are academically gifted but fall apart without structure or routine, something I've learned from speaking to Dr Tony Lloyd, chair of the ADHD Foundation.

It feels like you don't fit in *anywhere*; that you're a bit odd, always on the outskirts. You learn to copy others' behaviours and ways of communicating: forcing yourself to remain still; to make strong eye contact with people; to overcompensate for your chaos by periods of late-night work when the world feels less overwhelming, and you can't sleep anyway. When you feel as abnormal and isolated as you do, the pull to belong is magnetic. Ultimately, the stress of keeping up appearances will bubble over, manifesting as panic attacks when you're finally alone.

But you've managed to weather years of bullying throughout school and, as you get older, you'll take that experience and use it to develop empathy, as well as humour, which will come in useful for public speaking, if not your self-esteem. Please don't



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worry that Ben and Annabel are the only childhood pals you'll take into adulthood, after ricocheting from group to group wondering how Nicholas, your brother, manages to maintain the same friendships. In time you'll learn that this is partly because ADHD brains are low in dopamine and so seek stimulation in any form; that is, people with ADHD are drawn like moths to the proverbial flame of anything deemed new, exciting, and interesting. It's why you get so absorbed in books (later your biggest

time suck will be an iPhone – don't ask) and have seemingly random interests, such as Pokémon, Christmas carols and horse riding. But that's a bright side of ADHD – all those eclectic hobbies and interests will serve you well in your career as a freelance journalist, where you'll be called upon to write about everything from climate change to *Strictly Come Dancing*.

Having undiagnosed ADHD can make it difficult to deal with stress – and you'll face a lot of that. Over the years, you'll seek solace in food, until an observant doctor will diagnose you with a lifelong binge-eating disorder and prescribe outpatient therapy, but because life has a great sense of humour, you and your husband Harry will be dealing with infertility at the same time. There's never a great way to find out you can't have children, and I'm sorry to break this to you now, but at 36, having been with Harry for five years, you'll have two rounds of IVF. Both fail because your eggs are immature, which means children are very unlikely. The grief is debilitatingly jagged. No longer needing maternity leave, you quit your stable job on

a whim (how very ADHD of you). A few weeks later, you quit another vice – alcohol – because you may not have hit rock bottom but the feeling of permanently bumping along near it doesn't feel particularly good. That sobriety will throw a spotlight on how much you've been covering up difficult feelings all your life, and without thinking, you turn to caffeine because it doesn't affect you like it does other people you know. During a therapy session, while you neck an enormous black Americano, your therapist will say, 'You know, caffeine tolerance is very common in people with ADHD,' but you think nothing of it. Because ADHD describes hyper kids, doesn't it...

It will be a long time coming – if only you could have discovered the truth decades earlier – but take comfort that your life will begin to change one weekday morning in spring 2020. In the midst of a global pandemic (again, don't ask), your writing work has dried up so you're busy regrouting the bathroom instead, you see a friend has retweeted a post from a coach called Anna Grant. It asks, 'I'm curious, if you realised you had ADHD as an adult, what made you realise? A serendipitous encounter? A life change that upended old coping mechanisms? Something else?' Hours will pass as you read all the responses to that short, simple message – they will light a fire inside you. So many women saying that they'd spent years struggling with what they thought was anxiety, depression, eating disorders and addictions, only to read up on ADHD and realise *that* was what was going on. Your brain will feel like a city lighting up at nightfall. You'll think, this was who I was; this is who I am. You'll think how strange it is that if a friend hadn't shared those words, you might never have known.

You show *so* many of the signs, but they've always been mistaken for something else or ignored – until now. A lot of that is down to how ADHD has been characterised throughout the years, underpinned by 1970s research that was performed only on men and boys. Now we know they're more likely to exhibit their symptoms in a hyperactive – and outwardly disruptive – way, but women with ADHD present differently. While the hyperactivity



element certainly manifests in your washing-machine brain, whirling until late into the night, you're also a girl who has been conditioned to behave 'nicely'. It's why so many women, like you, aren't deemed to qualify as having ADHD and their behaviour is more often pinned on mood disorders, such as anxiety and depression, or misdiagnosed as borderline personality disorder. Dr Lloyd tells me adults only really started getting diagnosed in the UK in the noughties.

So, that day in 2020, I knew I had a battle on my hands. I listened to, read and watched endless resources until I'd built a case to take to my GP. But as I well knew, even in 2020, mental-health services in Britain were chronically underfunded and the ADHD referral waiting list for a diagnosis was a year. In some parts of the UK, it's two, if not longer. I used money I'd put aside for paying my tax bill and booked a consultation with a private ADHD specialist. I was desperately worried in case they told me I didn't really have ADHD – that I was just a terrible person – but a gentle yet thorough two-hour interview and Qb check follow-up test confirmed combined ADHD in the 94th percentile. Having this diagnosis confirmed was like someone telling me I wasn't an awful person. You'll feel euphoric: all those years spent trying to 'fix' yourself, and what you really needed was a user manual.

Wonderfully, you're going to make friends with scores of people who have the same type of brain and you'll discover that ADHD does not discriminate by class, race, gender or sexuality. You'll read a memoir called *Earthed*, written by Rebecca Schiller about her own experience of living with undiagnosed

ADHD, and one specific line will speak to you: 'While most people are made of 60 per cent water, I am composed of smoke and mirrors largely held together with shame.' I wish this wasn't the case, that you didn't have to spend so much of your time hiding and feeling ashamed of your real self – please know that the more women you learn of who've also been diagnosed with ADHD as adults, the more you feel understood and infinitely less ashamed of not fitting in. Women like Rachel Graves, a software engineer who was diagnosed aged 36, who says, 'I'd wonder why I couldn't just get on with my work, or why I'd spend hours at night going through things I've said that seem silly and feeling shame. Now I can look at that and go, "Ah, classic ADHD."' And fellow journalist Anita Bhagwandas, who echoes some of the emotions you'll feel when you finally get that diagnosis, 'Being diagnosed with ADHD as an adult [aged 37] meant a lot of the puzzle pieces finally fit – the reason I felt rejection so acutely, or why anything that required executive function was a challenge. But out-of-the-box thinking, creativity, empathy and problem-solving skills that come with ADHD, which aren't as well-documented as the negatives, arguably have really helped me succeed.'

It won't make everything better: trying different stimulant and non-stimulant medications and finding what works for you is a long process – and still very much a work in progress as I write this. You'll still suffer with episodes of depression. The grief you'll feel over not being able to have children remains an ongoing challenge. But you'll find strength and self-determination in taking control of your own narrative; in having identified the big boss problem. You'll find renewed purpose in helping to reduce stigma and spread awareness of how to obtain a diagnosis and manage symptoms, armed with an arsenal of alarms and reminders and systems to keep you on track. You'll go forward into the rest of your life knowing that you are not defective, just different.

Lots of love, and the biggest hug – Kat

ADHD in brief

From definition to diagnosis, ADHD Foundation chair Dr Tony Lloyd delivers the facts

What is ADHD?

It's a neurodevelopmental disorder, which often runs in families. It's not thought to develop in adults, so signs are present from childhood – these include inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsiveness.

How is an ADHD brain different?

In a number of ways, but the main one involves neurotransmitters including dopamine and noradrenaline. These

connect messages from one area of the brain to another, but for someone with ADHD this system is impaired.

How does someone get diagnosed?

You will need a referral from your GP to the community mental-health team who will assess you for referral for diagnosis. Waiting times vary through the UK. In England they are one year, they're two in Wales and Scotland, while Northern Ireland has limited adult ADHD provision.

Are there quicker options?

Psychiatry UK's Right To Choose service can shorten the NHS waiting time, but has no appointments available until October 2022 due to a flood of requests. Private diagnosis is quick and the condition can then sometimes be overseen by your NHS GP – but the costs of additional tests, medication and follow-up appointments can add up.

What does ADHD treatment look like?

ADHD can be treated using medicine, therapy, or both. The medications, aimed at reducing impulses and improving concentration, are usually stimulants and may be used in conjunction with SNRIs, which increase the amount of noradrenaline, which helps pass messages more smoothly between brain cells. Treatment can be overseen by a specialist or your GP. For more information and support, visit adhd.foundation.org.uk